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Published Version

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Stanisz-Lubowiecka, A. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2859-486X> (2024) On the language of liberalism: liberal language ideology in Polish discourse of linguistics (1970–1989) as a form of pro-democratic resistance. *Journal of Language and Politics*, 23 (4). pp. 565-587. ISSN 1569-9862 doi: 10.1075/jlp.23014.sta Available at <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/117270/>

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To link to this article DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1075/jlp.23014.sta>

Publisher: John Benjamins

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On the language of liberalism

Liberal language ideology in Polish discourse of linguistics (1970–1989) as a form of pro-democratic resistance

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In this article, I look at linguistic studies of communist propaganda produced by oppositional scholars in the last two decades of state socialism in Poland. I argue that Polish discourse of linguistics in 1970–1989 was a vehicle for the promotion of liberalism in the People’s Republic of Poland and an important area of political contestation. I demonstrate that Polish linguistic studies of communist propaganda should not be assumed to be “objective” or politically disengaged. Ideas about language detectable in these studies, especially “referentialism”, promote liberal democracy by consistently implying values characteristic of liberalism as a political ideology. In this way, Polish linguists engaged in a form of anti-communist resistance and formulated language policy proposals for the language of liberal democracy. I argue that language ideologies are sometimes systematically related to political ideologies by promoting specific political values or points of view.

Keywords: language ideology, language policy, Critical Discourse Analysis, liberalism, George Orwell, Newspeak, propaganda, communist authoritarianism, Poland, Eastern Europe

1. Introduction

In this paper, I will look at Polish discourse of linguistics in the last two decades of state socialism in the People’s Republic of Poland. More precisely, I will look at linguistic studies of communist propaganda produced between 1970 and 1989 by Polish oppositional scholars, primarily linguists, but also philologists, literary scholars, and sociologists. Many Polish linguists have followed the “prescriptivist” tradition (Curzan 2014), openly expressing normative statements about what lan-

guage should be like. I will argue that linguistic studies of communist propaganda may not be typical examples of “prescriptive” linguistics, but they are still highly normative, thus supporting or challenging specific visions of socio-political order, even if inadvertently.

I will argue that the authors of linguistic studies of communist propaganda were important political and cultural actors producing language ideologies in the last two decades of the People’s Republic of Poland. In other words, Polish discourse of linguistics at the time was a powerful vehicle for the promotion of language ideologies. Language ideologies are defined as systems of ideas about language, which are never politically neutral because they imply ideas about the desired socio-political world or critiques of the existing one (Kroskrity 2005; Lippi-Green 1997; Woolard and Schieffelin 1994). They are produced by political and cultural actors and can then become part of common sense in a given community (Geertz 2000). I will demonstrate that language ideologies are sometimes systematically related to political ideologies. Language ideologies are thus as “political” as political ideologies: both promote specific political values or points of view.

The questions which this study addresses are: What language ideologies can be detected in these studies of communist propaganda? Are these language ideologies related to any political ideologies and if so, how? This study is not another description of the language of communist propaganda in the People’s Republic of Poland, but a critical meta-analysis of such descriptions. A comparison between linguistic analyses or metalinguistic discourses about the language of propaganda in Poland and other states, e.g., Nazi Germany (Musolff 2010) or the USSR (Bokeriya and Dieva 2015) is outside the scope this study.

I will demonstrate that ideas about language and linguistic norms detectable in Polish linguistic studies of communist propaganda promote liberal democracy by consistently implying values characteristic of liberalism as a political ideology. These studies may not be full-fledged manifestos of liberalism, but their authors promote certain ideas about the role of language as the foundation of specific institutional arrangements of power, which can be interpreted as language policy proposals (Spolsky 2009, 5) for the language of liberal democracy. Hence, these studies should not be assumed to be “objective” or politically disengaged. They were not only a form of anti-communist resistance, but also promoted liberal democratic values in a country whose political system was non-democratic. I will thus demonstrate that liberalism is not an exclusively “Western” ideology (Krastev and Holmes 2020), contributing to the argument that domestic liberalism, even if it was not a dominant political ideology, existed in the European “East” and played an important role in the breakdown of the regime (Kubik 2020). I will

show how the discourse of linguistics was one of the vehicles of liberalism in the People's Republic of Poland.

Linguistics as a discipline makes a claim to be an "objective" empirical science by defining itself as "descriptive", not "prescriptive", that is "independent of political issues of authority, power and ideology" (Taylor 1990, 10). It does not, however, remove linguistic authority altogether, but "places that authority under the institutional control of a newly empowered elite, the new masters: namely, the professional scientists of language" (Taylor 1990, 26). The ideological nature of the field of linguistics has been identified using the concept of language ideologies, which have been shown to have tangible socio-political, e.g., in legitimising European colonialism (Errington 2008). My study of the critiques of communist propaganda will contribute to this area of research.

The ideal of objectivity (Daston and Galison 2007), the foundation of modern science and scholarship, was developed in the Enlightenment period together with liberalism as a political ideology and was associated with such philosophers as John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Benjamin Constant, Alexis de Tocqueville, and John Stuart Mill. Postmodern critique of liberalism has shown, however, that while liberal democratic ideas and values are often represented as "non-ideological" or "objective" (Gamble 2009), such claims fail to recognise their ideological character. My study is also a contribution to uncovering the ideological nature of liberalism as a political ideology. As a liberal myself, I believe it is necessary to acknowledge the ideological nature of liberalism in order to facilitate the analysis, acknowledge a possibility of alternative perspectives, and challenge the myth of objectivity. It is only then that pluralism, one of the key liberal ideas, can be facilitated, which is particularly pressing in increasingly polarised societies.

2. Language ideology: Definition

I define language ideologies as systems of ideas or configurations of concepts, sometimes organised into stories, that: (1) strive to develop explicit and coherent depictions of the nature, structure, and use of language in a social world (e.g., language shapes thought), (2) justify or challenge the form and use of a specific type of language in (de)legitimising power (e.g., deconstructing the "ideological" nature of "official" language can help to challenge the legitimacy of a system that relies on this language), and (3) provide blueprints (scripts, norms) for the ideal use of language for sustaining or changing the political system and/or changing

the world (e.g., all language should be politically neutral).¹ While political ideologies tend to be explicit, language ideologies are often implicit and can be reconstructed from the analysis of linguistic discourse. Because language ideologies discuss language as the only aspect of the social world, they tend to be less elaborate or comprehensive than political ideologies.

In my definition, I draw on the large body of literature on ideology (Freeden 2005; Geertz 1973; Ricœur 1986) and language ideology. Most authors define language ideologies as ideas and beliefs about the nature, structure, and use of language, which are rooted in social stratification (Kroskrity 2005; Silverstein 1976; Woolard 2020), morality (Woolard and Schieffelin 1994) or political structure (Irvine and Gal 2000). My study expands on the existent literature by discussing language ideology as a political tool in discourse about the language of politics. Most definitions show that the purpose of promoting language ideologies is to legitimise specific configurations of socio-political power. This corresponds to the first and second components of my definition: ideas about the nature of language and political legitimation (which also encompasses social domination). The third component of my definition, the norms of the ideal use of language, provides a link between the first two. The concept of norms rarely appears in other definitions, but they are an important component of discussions of specific language ideologies, e.g., nationalist (Gal 2006), standard (Joseph 1987; Lippi-Green 1997), or purist (Hill 1998). I thus believe linguistic norms should be a separate component of the definition of language ideology to improve its analytical clarity. By analysing these three components, I will demonstrate how language ideology worked in Polish linguistic studies of communist propaganda.

While the function of legitimising specific configurations of socio-political power is mentioned in a few definitions of both language ideologies and ideologies in general, their relationship has been observed, but not systematically studied. In his linguistic critique of *Imagined Communities*, Joseph disputes Anderson's argument that one of the conditions contributing to the emergence of modern nation states is the development of national languages. Joseph argues that the two are shaped together:

Anderson's constructionist approach to nationalism is purchased at the price of an essentialist outlook on languages. It seems a bargain to the sociologist or political scientist, to whom it brings explanatory simplicity...But...it is a false simplicity. National identities and languages arise in tandem, dialectically if you like, in a complex process that ought to be our focus of interest and study.

[emphasis mine] (2004, 124)

1. This definition is introduced and discussed in: Stanisiz-Lubowiecka A. and J. Kubik, *Populist and Liberal Mythology in Polish Political Discourse. In Search of Linguistic Indicators of Mythologisation* (in preparation).

Cameron takes this argument further, making a point that while inevitably political ideologies are expressed mainly by means of language, language is not simply a vehicle for conveying ideologies but is itself shaped by them:

Language should not be treated either as pre-existing raw material for the fashioning of ideologies or as a post-hoc vehicle for their expression. These are both idealizations of language which overlook the fact that it is itself shaped by the same social and ideological processes it is often invoked to explain.

(2006, 143)

My study will discuss this unanalysed relationship between language ideologies and political ideologies.

3. Data and method

For my data, I selected three collections of essays discussing the language of communist propaganda: Jakub Karpiński's *Mowa do ludu: Szkice o języku polityki* ["Talk to the People: Essays on the Language of Politics"] (1984), Michał Głowicki's *Nowomowa po polsku* ["Newspeak in Polish"] (1990), and a post-conference volume entitled *Nowomowa* ["Newspeak"] edited by Adam Heinz and Jolanta Rokoszowa (1985). The essays had previously been presented as conference papers or published in oppositional magazines either underground in the country or abroad in the "West" in the 1970s and early 1980s. While there is a growing body of research on communist propaganda in Poland, I was interested in texts written during state socialism, not afterwards (Ligarski and Łatka 2020; Semków 2004), which appeared both in domestic oppositional circles and abroad.

Three methodologies were combined in this study: thematic, rhetorical, and Critical Discourse Analysis. First, I compiled corpora from the collections of essays listed above and started with a thematic analysis using NVivo. Thematic analysis is very useful in the analysis of language, as it allows to identify depictions of language in specific discourses (Takeuchi 2021; Vessey and Nicolai 2022). I followed Deterding and Waters' "flexible coding" approach (2021). Stage one involves familiarising with emergent themes and indexing them. At stage two, I created top-level codes (key themes) based on the three components of my definition of language ideology (depictions of language, political legitimation, and linguistic norms) and matched themes (subthemes) with relevant top-level codes. To ensure consistency of codes across corpora, I reviewed the codes afterwards. I used annotations to mark pragmatic devices (such as implicatures and speech acts) and rhetorical figures (mostly metaphors and hyperboles). At stage three, theory refinement, I selected themes to be presented in this article based on

whether they appeared in at least two different essays. Essays by Karpiński and Głowiński were prioritised, as they were the only authors of more than one essay in corpus (six and twelve, respectively), and their essays were published chronologically first.

Secondly, drawing on one of the fundamental assumptions of CDA that “ideologies are acquired, expressed, enacted and reproduced by discourse” (Van Dijk 2006, 124), I analysed the selected passages by means of relevant expressions of ideology in discourse identified by Van Dijk: local meanings, lexicon, rhetorical structure, especially metaphor analysis (Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Underhill 2011), and pragmatics, especially the theory of implicature (Grice 1991).

Thirdly, I interpreted my corpus by analysing its context. Inspired by Wodak’s four-component definition of context (2007, 211) designed to study racist and nationalist discourses in the political field, I propose a five-dimensional contextual analytical framework, which is better suited to the nature of my data. I thus looked at: (1) the co-text; (2) the genre (Fairclough 1995, 14); (3) the socio-political context; (4) ideological context; and (5) retrospective linguistic context.

All my data is in Polish. Translations are mine. I translated selected passages into English during the writing of this article to perform data analysis in the original.

4. Thematic analysis of the corpus

In this section, I will present results of a thematic analysis of my data texts, guided by the three components of language ideology I identified in my definition.

4.1 Depictions of language: *Nowomowa* “devastates language” and “corrupts thought”

The term *nowomowa* was introduced by Głowiński in an essay entitled *Nowomowa (Rekonesans)* (first presented as a conference paper in 1978).² The paper and the concept became influential and cited in many studies of the language of communist propaganda in People’s Republic of Poland. Głowiński defines it in opposition to “colloquial language” or “classical Polish”. The two are different, yet inextricably related:

- (1) “The relationship between *nowomowa* and colloquial language (or classical Polish in general) is ambiguous. On the one hand, *nowomowa* must separate

2. Before, Karpiński used the term “a new language” (“nowy język”).

itself from colloquial language to maintain its identity; thus, it must have its own forms, properly shaped vocabulary, etc.; on the other hand, *nowomowa* must constantly invoke colloquial language and use its resources". (1990, 25)

In my corpus, the authors identify two biggest problems with *nowomowa*. According to Głowiński, the function of *nowomowa* and its biggest problem is its goal to not only replace, but also "devastate" the "classical language". For this reason, Głowiński explicitly calls *nowomowa* "a quasi-language" (1990:10). This "devastation" happens by means of semantic manipulations, which lead to the "decomposition of communication". On the one hand, it becomes no longer possible to express "authentic" content or attitudes. On the other, it triggers "reactions of distrust to language":

- (2) "*Nowomowa* not only seeks to replace the classical language, but also devastates it in various ways. It devastates it, e.g., by taking over its components and giving them a different meaning – often in a hidden way, i.e., it creates the appearance that within it words mean what they normally mean, when they really mean something else... *Nowomowa* thus decomposes communication – especially on public issues; it decomposes communication by distorting or, in a better case, neutralizing those formulas and styles behind which authentic content and authentic attitudes were hidden. It decomposes communication also because it affects social awareness, especially colloquial, it triggers reactions of distrust to any language". (1990, 21)

Głowiński uses the metaphor of natural catastrophes: "devastation" and the metaphor of decay: "decomposition" to create a catastrophic image of communication being no longer possible. "Communication", "authenticity", and "distrust" seem like allusions to, respectively, public discussion, freedom of expression, and legitimacy based on the consent of the governed, which are all liberal democratic values. The theme of semantic manipulations is rooted in the same axiology. The criticism of "giving [language] components a different meaning" implies the ideal of pure correspondence between words and meanings indicative of the speaker's honesty. It is ultimately a normative statement on "interest-free" politics, which can be interpreted as a promotion of the idea of popular sovereignty.

The other biggest problem with *nowomowa* identified in my corpus is its influence on people's thought. Karpiński engages in a philosophical discussion on the relationship between language and thought, citing George Orwell, Francis Bacon and authors interested in what he calls "the pathology of language" (1984, 28): Alfred Korzybski, Harold Lasswell, and Victor Klemperer. He also situates his criticism of communist propaganda in the context of social psychology as a field of research explaining the link between language and thought. Karpiński argues:

- (3) “The propagandist aims to **blur in the mind of the recipient** the differences between the state and the nation, between socialism and communism, between the party and society, between democracy and ‘socialist democracy’, between Polish interests and the interests of the ‘socialist camp’. It seems that these verbal identifications and confusions are supposed **to make it difficult to think about political matters harmful to the authorities**, with at least a certain degree of precision” (1984, 71)

This criticism of *nowomowa* is based on the concern about its influence on people’s thought. On the one hand, Karpiński criticises the purpose of the use of *nowomowa*, which is the legitimisation of the communist regime. On the other hand, similarly to the concern about the “devastation” of language, this criticism implicitly promotes an accurate relationship between words and meanings, or in other words an accurate correspondence of language to reality. Karpiński’s criticism of the differentiation between “democracy” and “socialist democracy” is an implicit call for a “truly” democratic system.

The nature of *nowomowa* is often represented with catastrophic imagery. The metaphor of pollution and contamination is particularly frequent:

- (4) “For both speaking and breathing, knowledge about the mechanisms that cause them is practically not needed by anyone. When we begin to ‘see the air’, it means that it is **polluted, poisoned**; air, ‘perceptible’, becomes **deadly for man**. **If we start to ‘see the language’ – it means that something is wrong with the language, that its basic signifying function has been disturbed**.”

(Rokoszowa 1985, 10)

Once again, the role of signifying is represented as the fundamental language function. The metaphor of pollution not only creates an image of propaganda as something unwanted and dangerous, but also anomalous, which assumes the ideal of “neutral” language – presumably one that accurately corresponds to reality.

4.2 Political legitimization: Nowomowa legitimises communism

The authors of my corpus consistently argue that *nowomowa* legitimises the communist regime and ideology. According to Karpiński, e.g., communist propaganda should be interpreted in the context in which it was used: by the Polish United Workers’ Party in the People’s Republic of Poland, whose claim to power was becoming increasingly contested and whose aim was to conceal the failures of the system. Karpiński argues that for this reason propaganda was inextricably linked to the Party and its ideology, and its goal was to procure legitimacy for the communist regime:

- (5) “When analysing the language of political propaganda in countries ruled by communist parties, it is worth keeping in mind the socio-political background. We are talking about **the language used by the party that exercises power and shapes social reality. This party wants to make the public believe that its power is legitimate**, and the reality it shapes – mostly the future, but also the present – is ‘bright’” (1984, 73)

Głowiński talks about democracy as the only system under which *nowomowa* can disappear, implying that a regime change is desired:

- (6) “I do not know whether *nowomowa* is reformable, but I do know that **it can disappear only when democracy comes**. Democracy without adjectives” (Głowiński 1990, 135)

It seems, however, that the type of democracy Głowiński promotes in this passage is liberal. Only liberal democracy, with its respect for the rule of law and the ideal of individual liberty (Laruelle 2022), can be associated with calls for “neutral” language.

A related theme is the magical function of *nowomowa*. A few authors recognise propaganda’s potential to “not only to describe reality, but also to create it” (Karpiński 1984, 71–72). Głowiński represents this function as an element of nature, which creates an image of magic as a powerful force subduing and intimidating humans – the opposite of individual liberty:

- (7) “**The element of magic** plays a huge role in *nowomowa*. Words do not so much refer to reality, they do not so much describe it as **create it. What is authoritatively said becomes real**” (1990, 8–9)

In this passage, the fundamental idea of poststructuralism that language is constitutive in creating reality (Foucault 1972) is represented in a negative way. What is criticised is the use of the magical function of language as a legitimisation strategy used by the authoritarian regime. This once again implies the ideal of language corresponding to reality in an “objective” way, associated with “interest-free” politics.

The theme of resistance to *nowomowa*, which becomes frequent in the context of the August 1980 strikes, can be interpreted as an attempt to mobilise people to oppose the communist authoritarian regime. Speaking about politicians, Głowiński pictures the use of *nowomowa* as a matter of personal choice:

- (8) “... as a public figure, no speaking subject is **condemned to *nowomowa***” (1990, 92)

In this context, Głowiński discusses parody in Polish literature as a common resistance strategy (1990, 43–59). Here both receivers and producers of *nowomowa* are represented as active and capable of rejecting it.

Calls for liberal democracy can also be found in direct criticism of communist politicians' linguistic incompetence:

- (9) "There have always been people who wrote in an awkward manner. What is important in this case, however, is that **this ineptitude is elevated to the rank of the prevailing style of speaking on public matters**". (Karpiński 1984, 75)

Karpiński's criticism of the linguistic "ineptitude" of communist politicians appeals to the ideal of "eloquence" (Joseph 1987), which is elitist and typical for "language complaints" aimed at maintaining the standard variety (Milroy and Milroy 2012). This criticism is thus yet another strategy of delegitimising the communist regime.

4.3 Linguistic norms: *Nowomowa* is about "ideological correctness" and "manipulation"

The authors of my corpus argue that *nowomowa* "devastates" language and corrupts thought because it is governed by a specific, system-supporting linguistic norm of ideological correctness. The implied desired norm is its opposite: language should be "neutral".

Karpiński links *nowomowa* to censorship, arguing that both are used at the service of the ideology:

- (10) "In **totalitarian regimes**, political propaganda is a **way of governing the souls**, and political authorities strive to be ideological authorities; they strive for **the monopoly of ideology and information**". (1984, 65)

The metaphor of "governing the souls", attributed to Joseph Stalin, is based on the belief in the relationship between language and thought. A hyperbole is used to describe the political regime in Poland, which by 1980, when this essay was first written, was increasingly contested. Karpiński nonetheless labels the system as "totalitarian", creating a catastrophic image of reality and arguably intending to provoke mobilisation.

Ideological correctness as the key principle of *nowomowa* is also described as "manipulation". Puzynina discusses it as one of "contemporary threats", alongside violence:

- (11) "Contemporary man is aware of numerous threats. These threats ... include, among others, human violence and manipulation. Both in the case of violence

and manipulation, a man is treated as an object: he is deprived of his proper dignity, his decisions are influenced in a brutal or deceitful way". (1985, 48)

Calls for human dignity were characteristic of the oppositional discourse of the Catholic Church at later stages of communist authoritarianism in Poland (Kubik 1994). At the same time, they invoke the ideal of self-determination suppressed by manipulation, which is described as "brutal" and "deceitful".

Ideologisation of *nowomowa* was achieved, according to its critics, by means of a few rhetorical devices. A few authors argue that the most important of these is binarism:

- (12) "The most important procedure in *nowomowa* is **the imposition of a clear value sign**; this sign, leading to transparent polarizations, has no right to raise doubts, its goal is a firm, unquestionable judgement. Often judgments leading to dichotomous divisions become more important than meaning. Meanings can be vague and imprecise, but **judgements must be clear and unambiguous**". (Głowiński 1990: 8)

Ideological correctness is also achieved by several linguistic such as periphrases, understatements, euphemisms, and omissions, which make the "truth" difficult to know:

- (13) "... information about an unsuccessful situation can be passed, but with an ever **growing degree of difficulty**". (Bralczyk 1985, 103)

Bralczyk provides examples of how these devices were used as an attempt to divert people's attention from actual problems. What is implied is once again the ideal of "neutral" language accurately representing reality, which stands for "interest-free" politics representing freedom of information and popular sovereignty.

The theme of the persuasive function of language is often brought up, which is about making people share specific views or beliefs:

- (14) "The intention of the administrators of political propaganda is that the language of this propaganda is primarily to perform the persuasive function: **it is to influence the recipients**, to induce them to show solidarity with what the propagandist urges them to (in particular with the Party, with the 'party line') and to condemn what should be condemned (the recipients of propaganda are to be against various 'evil forces' and 'specific groups')". (Karpiński 1984, 72-73)

What is implied is yet again the ideal of language only playing the informative function, with the persuasive function constructed as a deviation. In the criticism of *nowomowa* there is thus an implied ideal of language: such that renders the "Truth" as closely as possible; language that is truthful (making correct statements

about the state of events), “apt” and “precise”. This ideal can be interpreted as a language policy proposal for the language of liberal democracy.

5. Contextual analysis

In this section, I interpret my corpus by analysing the five dimensions of context I identified earlier.

5.1 Co-text: Orwell’s Newspeak

The term *nowomowa* used to describe the language of communist propaganda in Poland is a Polish calque of the term “Newspeak” coined by George Orwell in a novel entitled *Nineteen Eighty-four* (1949). Some of the ideas about *nowomowa* are also inspired by Orwell. In this novel, Newspeak was the language of a fictional socialist totalitarian state Oceania, which was based on “old” English and used to communicate ideological content. Its purpose was to make it impossible for people to think about anything that would not be compatible with the official ideology. The appendix to the novel entitled “The Principles of Newspeak”, featuring a quasi-scientific analysis of Newspeak, was published at the beginning of the volume entitled *Nowo-mowa*.

Orwell’s criticism of the language of propaganda has been interpreted as an instance of liberal ideology. Explaining Orwell’s influence, Cameron argues that his ideas about language are founded on the association between plainness or transparency and democratic values (2012), and thus “encapsulate a liberal language ideology that continues to be common sense for the western political class, and which is rarely subjected to critical scrutiny because it is not generally apprehended as ‘ideological’”³ (2006, 147). Gary (1999) also shows that the term “propaganda” tends to be attributed to political opponents.

5.2 Genre analysis: Academic studies and “dissident” polemics

The texts included in my corpus are instances of an inherent hybrid of academic articles or conference papers and “dissident” polemics. Their authors’ academic profession and expertise in Polish linguistics or related disciplines allowed them to describe *nowomowa* in a scientific way. However, because their studies were published in underground magazines in Poland and abroad (such as *Kultura*,

3. The association between plainness and democracy has, however, been recently questioned in the context of the language of Donald Trump (see, e.g., Sclafani 2017).

Głos, or *Kultura Niezależna*) and because the conference was co-organised by the local Independent and Self-Governing Trade Union NSZZ “Solidarność”, they also have qualities of “dissident” polemics. In this sense, they can be considered precursors of CDA, which at that time did not have yet an explicit methodology or acknowledged researcher positionality.⁴ By publishing and presenting their studies in oppositional media and at oppositional conferences, often under pseudonyms (especially in the 1970s), their authors engaged in a courageous “act of everyday rebellion” (Scott 1990). In this way, their texts partly lose such qualities as academic rigour and attempts to strive for “objectivity”, and become inherently politically engaged.

5.3 The socio-political context: People’s Republic of Poland (1970–1980)

The People’s Republic of Poland was one of the post-totalitarian states in the Soviet bloc. The communist elites simultaneously controlled the economic (the means of production), political (the means of coercion), and cultural/spiritual sphere (the means of indoctrination) (Nowak 1991) and the dominant political ideology was a hybrid of communism and socialism (Kubik 1994). The regime was thus non-democratic, but as argued by Linz and Stepan, it was the most “relaxed” in the Soviet bloc and should be classified as “communist authoritarianism” (1996, 261).

The whole state apparatus was involved in propaganda and censorship (Romek 2015). All state (official) media were controlled by the communist authorities: the press, the only two TV channels of Polish TV (Telewizja Polska, TVP), and the three channels of the Polish Radio (Polskie Radio). Propaganda is not uncommon in most political systems. However, “[t]he major difference between political propaganda in Communist countries and in Western democracies is not to be found in the political languages used by these systems but in the state monopoly of the means of communication and strict preventive state censorship in the East and its lack in the West” (Kubik 1994, 42). It is this monopoly that the effectiveness of communist propaganda should be attributed to.

The last two decades of state socialism was the time of increasingly powerful challenges to the communist power (Rothschild 2008). Polish students joined by some academics first in Warsaw and then many major universities in the country protested against censorship in March 1968. In December 1970, workers went on strike in Baltic cities in consequence of a severe economic crisis in the 1960s. Both waves of protests were brutally suppressed by the Party-state and its members faced severe repressions. However, they were followed by the trend-reversing change at

4. I would like to thank one of the anonymous reviewers for bringing this to my attention.

the top of the pyramid of power and the significant relaxation of the regime in the 1970s. This trend-reversing change is evident in my data: it was not until 1970 that oppositional texts discussing the language of communist propaganda were first published.

The term “opposition” in the People’s Republic of Poland did not mean a proper parliamentary opposition, but the people who for various reasons and in various ways did not support the communist regime both in the country and abroad in the “West”. Anti-communist opposition comprised part of intellectual and cultural elites, some workers and peasants, and the Catholic Church. Their political views were diverse. Forms of resistance included strikes and protests, open letters, and uncensored (underground, “independent”, “illegal”, or “samizdat”) publications, which many authors of my corpus participated in. Different oppositional groups looked for ways of cooperation at different points, e.g., intellectuals with liberal and conservative views united in the 1970s (Friszke 2011), but it was in the 1980s that the opposition formed an organised movement known as “Solidarity” (Bernhard 1993). Linguists were an important group in the growing diffident movement. Many authors of linguistic studies of communist propaganda were involved in anti-communist opposition with liberal and sometimes conservative views (Zarycki 2022).

5.4 Ideological context: Liberalism

Fawcett defines liberalism as a political ideology and political theory which laid the ground for the development of democracy and is characterised by four key ideas: (1) an assumption of the inescapability of conflict of interests and beliefs in society; (2) the need to control human power by law; (3) progress, as it will “make society and its citizens less unruly”; and (4) the restraint on superior power to mistreat or exclude people no matter who they are etc. (2018, 7–13). The values associated with liberalism are thus, respectively, (1) diversity and dialogue, (2) popular sovereignty and the rule of law, (3) progress, (4) individual liberty, equality, and inclusivity protected by law. Except progress, which is also associated with socialism and communism, I have demonstrated that all these values are implied in my corpus. Hence, I call language ideology I identified “liberal”.

The idea of individual liberty has also been adopted by some conservatives: “the liberty of the individual is a fine thing, both good in itself and worthwhile for its beneficial effects, when taken in the right proportion. It has, and will always have, an important place in a broader theory of political conservatism” (Hazony 2022). This can explain why more conservative authors of my corpus (e.g., Puzynina), who elsewhere promoted standard language ideology usually associated with conservatism and nationalism, promote also individual freedom.

Freedom of speech, indicative of individual liberty on the terrain of language, is a particularly important civil liberty, which Mill (2012) portrayed as the key one. Harris interprets the discourse about freedom of speech as a defence of the right of inclusion in a community (1990, 159), or what Stanley calls “democratic deliberation” (2015).

5.5 Retrospective linguistic context: Against “referentialism”

The ideas that *nowomowa* “devastates” language and corrupts thought assume that it destroys the relationship between words and meanings. Woolard refers to this relationship as a “referentialist ideology that dominates Western modernity and emphasizes one function of language, that of making propositions about a world that stands outside language, over pragmatic and performative functions that often go unrecognized” (2020, 3). “Referentialism” was consolidated by Saussurian structuralism, which was the dominant linguistic theory in Poland until the 1970s (Zarycki 2022).

“Referentialism” provides the foundation for the idea of communication as “telementation”, that is transfer of ideas from mind to mind by means of encoding and decoding meanings (Harris 1981). Both assume that language is a system in which meanings are fixed and identical for every speaker. Language, however, varies in time, place, across social groups (e.g., Chambers and Schilling 2013), and among individuals, for which the term “idiolect” has been developed (e.g., Lieb 1993). Meanings are rarely definite (Abbott 2006). “Referentialism” also prioritises verbal communication and disregards paralinguistic qualities (Ephratt 2011), such as prosody (Barth-Weingarten, Dehé, and Wichmann 2009), mimics and gestures (Antas 2013), or extralinguistic context (Van Dijk 1977).

“Referentialism” also assumes that all language does is to *refer to* a reality that “stands outside language”. Underhill argues that language rarely refers to “things”, but often designates their qualities or relationships between them (2011, 165). If language is just a way of talking about the reality that is “already there”, the discussion about it becomes merely a discussion about “ornaments” (Cameron 2006, 147). What this argument says is that *the same reality* could be described in a different way. But what language does is to *construct* reality, rather than simply referring to it (Berger and Luckmann 1991). The influence of the language of propaganda is thus not in “the minds of the recipients”, but in the social reality that was constructed, and which will continue to shape Polish socio-political reality for many years to come.

Additionally, “referentialism” assumes that the condition of the accurate correspondence of language to reality is “honesty”, which is also problematic. In her

linguistic study of lies and lying, Antas (2000) proposes that they should not be studied within propositional logic, but as speech acts. Antas argues:

‘telling the truth’ is giving linguistic (or at least communicative) testimony to the content of our beliefs about it, while lying is giving such testimony to the false content of beliefs about what we believe to be true ... when we are ‘telling the truth’, in fact we only bear witness to our notions of what we believe to be true, not to the facts. And we may be wrong. (2000, 113)

The foundation of honesty is thus extralinguistic beliefs, and what seems to be linguistic reference to “objective Truth” is in reality grounded in a particular axiology.

The idea in the key role of language in affecting people’s cognition has a long history. The theory of linguistic relativity was particularly influential, according to which “Languages differ in the thoughts they afford to us” (Schlesinger 1991), but its strong version, linguistic determinism, has been disproven. The exact extent to which language influences thought and how important other factors are is still and most likely will forever be subject to debate, not only in the field of linguistics, but also anthropology, psychology and cognitive science (Gumperz and Levinson 1996; Pütz and Verspoor 2000).

This idea, as well as the belief that language can be “devastated”, separates language from its users, who after all can to a certain degree “control” and influence it. This idea thus excludes the possibility of people genuinely supporting the communist regime. It also assumes the division between people who cannot realise they are being manipulated and those who can, which can be interpreted as an elitist argument (Cameron 2012). In the People’s Republic of Poland, it was in fact not just the elites who were aware of being manipulated. At later stages of communism, the polarisation between “us” (the nation) and “them” (the authorities) became very strong, largely because of the development of counterhegemonic discourses (Davies 1984; Kubik 1994). Wierzbicka (1990), e.g., shows resistance to language of communist politicians among Poles, who developed an alternative “anti-totalitarian” language: “Linguistic self-defense in a totalitarian or semitotalitarian state consists of finding ways of giving expression (in a more or less permanent form) to those emotions, attitudes, and preoccupations which in a country dominated by severe political controls cannot be expressed openly” (1990, 8). The theme of resistance to *nowomowa* in my corpus is only discussed in the late 1980s, arguably with an intention to further mobilise anti-communist opposition. It is thus an instance of the frequent overestimation of the influence of the communist state on people in the discourse of intellectuals (Lebow 2013).

5.6 Contextual analysis: Summary

All the five dimensions of context show the inherent tension between the scientific perspective and political engagement in the texts included in my corpus. These five dimensions reinforce each other in evidencing the existence of an ideology behind the critiques of *nowomowa*. Drawing on Orwell, their authors engage in a liberal critique of a socialist “totalitarian” state. Publishing their academic work in “samizdat” publications, the authors of critiques of *nowomowa* produced “dissident” polemics. Criticising *nowomowa* when the communist regime was weakening, their authors, who were often involved in oppositional activities, engaged in a form of resistance aimed to undermine the contested regime. Identifying key liberal values, I showed how they correspond to values implied in the criticism of *nowomowa*. Finally, presenting contemporary linguistic studies on the ideas found in my corpus, I demonstrated how “referentialism” is no longer considered scientifically accurate, but was serving the purpose of “everyday resistance” at the time.

6. Conclusions

In this article, I have argued that linguistic studies of *nowomowa* in the last two decades of state socialism in Poland promote liberal democracy by consistently implying liberal values such as individual liberty, freedom of speech, popular sovereignty, or the rule of law. In other words, Polish discourse of linguistics in 1970–1989 was a vehicle for the promotion of liberalism in the People’s Republic of Poland. I have demonstrated that language ideology found in these studies is systematically related to liberalism as a political ideology. I have shown that the ideas that *nowomowa* “devastates language”, “corrupts thought”, and is governed by “ideological correctness” or “manipulation” are founded on the “referentialist ideology”, which calls for “neutral” language, the accurate correspondence of language to reality representing “interest-free” politics. But the criticism of *nowomowa* legitimising the communist regime is an implicit call for a liberal democratic system. Underpinned by linguistic theories which to some extent were inaccurate even at the time when linguistic studies of *nowomowa* were produced, these studies were a form of anti-communist resistance and promoted liberal democratic values in Poland under communism. They also formulated language policy proposals for the language of liberal democracy.

Looking at five dimensions of the context, I further supported my argument that there is an ideology behind linguistic critiques of *nowomowa*. I have concluded that the discourse of linguistics can be an important area of political con-

testation. I have also demonstrated how liberal values can be hidden in “objective” scientific discourse, showing how modern scholarship is founded on liberalism and thus contributes to the legitimization of liberal democracy.

Funding



This research is partly supported by the CEELBAS AHRC DTP.

Open Access publication of this article was funded through a Transformative Agreement with University College London.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my PhD supervisors, Professor Jan Kubik (Rutgers University and UCL SSEES) and Dr Riitta-Lisa Valijärvi (UCL SSEES and Uppsala University) for their valuable comments and insights. The final product is hard to imagine without their guidance. I am indebted to the anonymous reviewers, whose perceptive feedback made me significantly improve the final draft of this paper. I am also very grateful to Dr Jelena Čalić (UCL SSEES) and Professor Sylvia Jaworska (University of Reading) for their insightful critiques and advice, which helped me refine my ideas at the final stages of writing this article. Finally, I would like to express gratitude to the participants of the British Association of Slavonic and East European Studies annual conference at the University of Glasgow (31 March–2 April 2023) and of the British Association of Applied Linguistics Language Policy SIG Reading Group (9 March 2023), where I presented drafts of this paper, for their incisive questions and criticisms, which pushed my argument further.

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Publication history

Date received: 12 February 2023

Date accepted: 13 October 2023

Published online: 28 November 2023